

Britain: SAS military forces unit to be permanently stationed in London

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5 February 2007

A unit of Britain's elite military force, the Special Air Service (SAS), is to be permanently based in London. Its team of assassins, surveillance specialists and bomb-disposal experts will be on 24-hour alert. The Ministry of Defence has requested that the location of the unit be kept secret.

Although the SAS has been involved in several raids in London recently, this is the first time it will have a permanent base in the UK outside of its headquarters in rural Herefordshire. The unit was flown by helicopter to London in July 2005 when bombs exploded on the Underground rail network and is said to have helped police find suspects involved in a second bomb attempt and also to storm their homes.

Alongside the move of the SAS to London has been the decision by the intelligence agency MI5 to expand its networks and set up a special headquarters on the outskirts of London with teams of surveillance specialists, allowing them greater access to the rest of the country.

Both developments are in line with a major security review carried out by Home Secretary John Reid, who is calling for the Cabinet Office to be given responsibility for managing the government's counterterrorist strategy.

Two years ago, the Blair government announced the expansion of special forces and the intelligence services as part of the "war on terror." Extra funding has been given to four squadrons of the 22 SAS unit, the Royal Marines and the naval equivalent of the SAS, the Special Boat Service. The director of special forces now attends the Cobra civil emergencies meetings held by the cabinet office.

According to the *Times*, the SAS move is "intended to provide the police with a combat-proven ability to deal with armed terrorists in the capital."

It follows outrage over the fatal shooting of the innocent Brazilian electrician Jean Charles de Menezes by armed police officers in July 2005.

Jean Charles was the victim of the "shoot-to-kill" policy, Operation Kratos, secretly adopted by police in 2003. Following the July 7, 2005, terror bombings in London, police seized the opportunity to put this policy into deadly effect. Jean Charles was covertly trailed by plainclothes officers after the block of flats in which he lived had been placed under surveillance. Despite subsequent police claims that he had been positively identified as a terrorist suspect, no attempt was made to detain him en route to the Underground station. Indeed, Jean Charles had no warning of the imminent danger to his life until several plainclothes armed officers grabbed him as he entered the train, pinned him to his seat and fired seven bullets at point-blank range into his head.

Far from retreating in the face of protests over the covert shoot-to-kill policy, the government has drafted into the capital a military unit whose primary purpose is to conduct such operations.

Shoot-to-kill operations by the SAS were long a feature of the British occupation of Northern Ireland. The SAS worked closely with the British Army's Force Research Unit, which was one of several covert units operating in Northern Ireland. From the early 1970s, British military policy against the Irish Republican Army increasingly relied on spies, dirty operations, double agents, informers, army and loyalist death squads, in addition to 25,000 or so regular troops. The SAS and the 14th Intelligence Company both became notorious for organising the killing of republicans as part of this permanent undercover war. It was reported that officers from the FRU were involved in the killing of Jean Charles.

The SAS also specialises in covert operations and dirty tricks. As recently as September 19, 2005, Iraqi police officers arrested two undercover SAS officers at a Basra checkpoint, travelling in an unmarked car containing weapons and explosives, which led to accusations that they were acting as agents provocateurs. The BBC reported that the SAS men's car contained "weapons, explosives and communications gear," adding that this was "standard kit for British special forces."

A rescue operation was mounted involving an attack on the police station holding the men, using some 10 armoured personnel vehicles and a helicopter to storm the building followed by a pitched battle with around a thousand demonstrators, incensed by the discovery of the SAS's activities. Troops used live fire and baton rounds, killing several people and injuring many more.

The Blair government made no announcement about the SAS's move to the capital, and it is unlikely anything would have been known had not the *Times* learned of the development from defence sources.

The readiness of the Labour government to employ death squads on the streets of Britain's capital has implications that go beyond the possibility of innocent victims of terror operations against Islamic fundamentalists. London has become one of the most socially polarised cities in the world, where enclaves of the world's super-rich elite are surrounded by some of the worst living conditions and poorest people in the country. More repressive measures will be necessary to control rising social and political discontent in the general population, including the use of the most ruthless killing machine in the British Army when the need arises.



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